Published in final edited form as:

Int J Aging Hum Dev. 2012 ; 75(2): 95–113.

SPIRITUALITY AS A LIVED EXPERIENCE: EXPLORING THE ESSENCE OF SPIRITUALITY FOR WOMEN IN LATE LIFE*

Lydia K. Manning, Ph.D., MGS

Duke University, Durham, North Carolina

Abstract

Against the backdrop of a dramatic increase in the number of individuals living longer, particularly older women, it is vital that researchers explore the intersection of spirituality, gender, and aging. In this qualitative study of six women aged 80 and older, I explore, using, multiple, in-depth interviews, the experiences of spirituality over the life course. A hermeneutic phenomenological analysis of the interviews was performed and provided insights into the nature of their “lived experience” allowing for the understanding of the essence of their spirituality. The results are presented as an interpretation of the participants’ perceptions of their spirituality and spiritual experiences. For the women in this study, the essence of their spirituality lies in: being profoundly grateful; engaging in complete acceptance; and having a strong sense of assuredness, while stressing the linkages and importance of spirituality. Implications for understanding spirituality for older adults are considered.

INTRODUCTION

Evidence indicates that for many aging individuals spiritual capacity gradually increases, especially with regards to self-acceptance and perceptions of one’s life having integrity (Atchley, 2000; Idler, Kasl, & Hays, 2001; Koenig, 2006; Moberg, 2001; Tornstam, 2005). Scholars argue the natural process of aging, or the passage of chronological time with a finite and foreseeable end, creates a context where older adults can become more self-reflexive and self-accepting, opening the mind/body/spirit to an expansion and deeper sense of knowing (Atchley, 2000; McFadden, 2005). Within the field of aging, there is evidence that as individuals grow closer to the natural end of their lives, the spiritual dimension gains in prominence (Johnson, 2009; Moberg, 2005; Tornstam, 2005). Recognizing that spirituality is an important aspect of the meaning-making and developmental process in later life, it is vital that elders are afforded the opportunity to share their spiritual experiences. Explorations of their spiritual lives provide researchers with insight (Atchley, 2000).

Spirituality and Aging

In the past decade, spirituality as an area of scientific inquiry has materialized from obscurity, becoming an area of great interest to researchers in aging (Atchley, 2008; Glicksman & Glicksman, 2008; McFadden & Kozberg, 2008; McFadden, 2003; Moberg, 2005; Nelson-Becker, 2003). Atchley (2000) claims that while spirituality is quite popular in mainstream culture and the academy, its “soft” nature from a scientific viewpoint causes “spirituality to be stereotyped by scientific gerontology as a suspect enterprise” (p. 327).

*The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and publication of this article by NIH [grant 5T32 AG00029-35].

© 2012, Baywood Publishing Co., Inc.

Direct reprint requests to: Lydia Manning, Box 90088, Duke University, Durham, NC 27708-0098, lydia.manning@duke.edu

This stereotyping results because spirituality deals with aspects of human life not easily measured by conventional scientific methods (Atchley, 2000). Regardless of such experiences being difficult to measure, there are increasing numbers of people willing to discuss their spirituality with researchers (Atchley, 2000; Atchley, 2008; Nelson-Becker, 2003).

Moberg (2001) asserts that all humans have a spiritual dimension by nature of being human, and therefore, each person has the capacity for spirituality. In essence, spirituality in late life consists of finding core meaning in life, responding to meaning, and being in relationship with God/Other. Aging invites contemplative activities. For many people, as they grow older, these contemplations are translated into the search for life-meaning (MacKinlay, 2006). Studies suggest that having a strong sense of meaning in life results in better physical and mental health outcomes, as well as improved quality of life and subjective well-being (Krause, 2004; MacKinlay, 2001; Nygren, Alex, Jonsen, Gustafson, Norberg, & Lundman, 2005). This search for life-meaning is influential for spiritual experiences and expressions, particularly as one ages and confronts various realities associated with end of life. This progression changes the nature of meaning making from provisional, everyday meaning to larger life-meaning (MacKinlay, 2006). Understanding the spiritual experiences of the oldest-old is important to better ground what we know as gerontologists regarding aging over the lifecourse. In turn, this will help us better understand the implications of everyday life-meaning for older adults.

The intersection of spirituality, religion, and aging received an upturn of interest in the 1990s, and continues in the early 21st century (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). In particular, an interest in health emerged during this time, indicating a concentration on the functional aspects of spirituality and religion pertaining to aging. Understanding the relationship between “spirituality” and “religion,” including the extent to which they can be disentangled, has been a central part of this spiritual turn in gerontology. The continuing interest in this debate is evidenced by the diversity of definitions and conceptualizations of “spirituality” and “religion” (Atchley, 2009; Johnson, 2009; McFadden, 2005; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005; Wink, 2003). For example, Wink (2003) examines “religious dwellers” and “spiritual seekers” over the lifecourse, arguing that spirituality and religion have enough intersecting qualities that they do not need to be split as constructs. This argument suggests that older adults can and do distinguish a difference is salient within scholarly debates, but to the extent these differences are relevant for the every day practice of spirituality is questionable. Zinnbauer and Pargament (2005) define spirituality as the search for the sacred — that which is special, set apart from the ordinary, and deserving of veneration. Religion refers to the search for significance in ways related to the sacred. The process of the search, or seeking, is important for their conceptualization of both spirituality and religion. Despite these conceptual debates and differences, most scholars agree that spirituality and religion are related constructs.

As larger numbers of older adults continue to age, it becomes increasingly important to understand how older adults are responding to late life challenges and opportunities, such as the death of a spouse, the loss of physical functioning, changes in role status with retirement, or the cultivation of new relationships in late life. Focusing on older adults’ spiritual experiences is part of this larger understanding. As McFadden (2005) points out, “for many, but certainly not all older people, faith communities, spiritual and religious experiences and beliefs concerning the sacred will contribute to life quality and meaning” (p. 172). Spirituality provides a framework that guides individuals through painful and joyful events, often facilitating positive discoveries amidst negative experiences (Ardelt, Ai, & Eichenberger, 2008). Consequently, spirituality is a powerful resource in late life providing many older adults with the ability to adapt to changing individual needs.

Spirituality and Gender in Late Life

A review of the literature indicates there is a male-dominated perspective evidenced in the world's major religious traditions, particularly in the Western world (Learn, 1996; Manning, 2010; Ray & McFadden, 2001). Bynum (1986) argues that areas such as spirituality and religion cannot be investigated without considering gender. Ray and McFadden (2001) consider gender in the discussion of spiritual development, asserting that women are much more collective in their spirituality than men, using web and quilt metaphors for how women relate to themselves and others spiritually.

Ray and McFadden (2001) point out that "much feminist research and theorizing suggests that individuation models do not adequately describe women's experience" as it relates to spirituality and spiritual development (p. 202). For example, Learn (1996) likens women's spirituality in later life to a quilt, suggesting with this metaphor that women stitch together with others various sections and panels and materials using a technique characterized by process to create spiritual identity in later life. Despite these claims, research exists investigating the spiritual lives of older women. For example, Vahia et al. (2011) found that spirituality was a key factor for women in promoting resilience to stress over the life course. Foley (2000) using the Spiritual Well-Being Index found that spirituality was of considerable importance to the women in her study and that high levels of spirituality was a predictor of higher levels of self-rated health and subjective well-being. Harvey (2006) found that for African-American women in later life, spirituality was a key component in the management of chronic illness. These researchers, along with others, claim that more investigation is needed concerning the spiritual lives of older women.

The findings presented here illuminate the experiences and voices of women in later life. As the findings make clear, spirituality and religion are more than constructs for these women. Spirituality is a way of being in the world that affords these women connection and meaning. Paying careful attention to our definitions as researchers is important, but more important is providing an understanding of a phenomenon and the meaning it may have for people, meaning as it is told by the individuals living that experience. For the purpose of this research, I explore the spiritual dimensions of my participants; that is, I seek to discover how they experience their spirituality, including their spiritual self. In this research, I use Atchley's (2009) definition of spirituality as a "realm of human experience encapsulating an intense awareness of the present; transcendence of the personal self; and/or a feeling of connection with all of life, the Universe or a Supreme Being" (p. 2). This conceptualization of spirituality encompasses religion. As the women in this study are interviewed, their own conceptualizations of spirituality emerged as they described for me how they experience and live their spirituality.

METHODS

Design and Sample

This phenomenological inquiry, using models presented by Van Manen (1990) and Moustakas (1994), utilizes a person-centered approach in the gathering and collecting of data. Moustakas, influenced heavily by the scholarship of Van Manen's approach to phenomenology, adheres to a procedural analysis of a phenomenon. Hermeneutic phenomenology is the specific type of phenomenology used in this study. In hermeneutic phenomenology, a particular phenomenon that is meaningfully experienced by an individual or group of individuals is investigated, in this case spirituality. This approach considers how the phenomenon is experienced and what it means to the person within a specific context (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). A key component to hermeneutic phenomenology is

not only describing the phenomenon under investigation, but also interpreting the meaningful experiences of those being studied.

I interviewed six women on five separate occasions throughout this study to understand how they conceptualized and described their spirituality. Multiple interviewing is ideal in phenomenological research as it allows for an in-depth exploration into the phenomenon under investigation (Moustakas, 1994). Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 3 hours. Sampling for this research aligns with the basic tenets and assumptions of hermeneutic phenomenology as well as the assumptions of narrative inquiry. Participants were not randomly selected or predetermined during the initial planning stages of the project. Women were selected to participate in this study based on their firsthand experience with the phenomenon of interest—spirituality in advanced age. This study used a purposeful sampling approach, common in qualitative design (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I relied on a non-probability, purposeful sample of older women for this research. More specifically, a snowball sampling technique was used to capture the richness and detail (both commonalities and disparities) regarding how the women in this study experience spirituality.

Women were sought based on a variety of settings and living arrangements. The women resided in the midwestern region of the United States and were mostly community dwelling (none were institutionalized, one lived in assisted living facilities in an independent apartment, and the remaining five lived in their own homes). The women ranged in age from 82 to 94. Four participants were white and two were African American. All were widowed, and all but one woman had children. Education attainment ranged from a high school degree to a graduate degree. All of the participants lived lives of socio-economic comfort. Five of the six women identified as Christian, and one identified as a Unitarian Universalist; five of the women were still active in their respective faith communities. Initially, I intended to interview nonagenarians and sampled accordingly. I attended a photography exhibit of nonagenarians on display at a local art gallery, which prompted me to contact the artist and request that she connect me with the women from her photography project. The artist agreed and provided me with names and mailing addresses of 15 women over the age of 90. I sent a letter explaining my study to these women, and two responded by telephone to express their interest in being interviewed for this project. I scheduled interviews with these two women and began data collection. The remaining four participants came via snow-ball sampling.

I contacted each participant by telephone, introduced myself, and explained the nature and intent of my study. As a brief introduction, each woman was informed that the interviews would focus on three topics of discussion:

1. their spiritual lives and experiences;
2. how they experience their spirituality in later life; and
3. what is meaningful and valuable about their spirituality.

In addition, each woman agreed to be interviewed up to five additional times. Individual, in-depth interviews were used to gather data to explore each woman's experience of spirituality. The interviews took place in the homes of the women and concentrated on core, or essential, spiritual experiences, beliefs, and practices throughout the lifecourse and the impact of those experiences on their lives. Initial interviews lasted from 1 to 2 hours. A semi-structured interview guide was used to ask each woman to talk about major spiritual moments over the lifecourse, spiritual experiences, spiritual influences, and current spiritual beliefs and practices. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The interview opened with, "I'm interested in finding out about your core spiritual experiences (beliefs and practices) and how you have come to hold them. Start wherever you would

like.” These interviews reflect a degree of interpretation in the moment, by the researcher and the women, regarding spirituality as a phenomenon.

Data Analysis

As the in-depth interviews were being conducted to gather the lived experience of spirituality for the women in my study, I was able to engage in phenomenological reflection, or engaging in dialogue with each woman about her transcript, particularly in the follow-up interviews that occurred with each participant (Van Manen, 1990). Subsequently, because data collection and analysis occur simultaneously and are ongoing, I was able to adjust my phenomenological investigation according to data emerging from the investigation. This process afforded me the opportunity to adjust my interview guides and manage the process of idea generation.

Central to a hermeneutic phenomenological investigation is the technique of phenomenological reduction, or the process of reflecting and writing in a manner that facilitates the researcher’s understanding of the essential structures of a specific phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). This process of reduction in a phenomenological investigation involves identifying a phenomenon that ignites motivation on behalf of the researcher, suspending pre-existing assumptions and biases, then discarding pre-existing scientific knowledge about the phenomenon under investigation, and lastly being able to see beyond the descriptions of the lived experience to interpret the larger essence or universal aspects of the experience (Van Manen, 1990). The process of reduction or arriving at the essence of an experience involves reflection and writing. The methods used, encouraged by the work of Van Manen, of phenomenological reflection and writing as they are used for the purposes of data analysis are discussed below.

According to Van Manen (1990), the process of arriving at an understanding of the lived experience is to conduct a thematic analysis and to determine incidents of that experience and essential themes; these two steps are part of the phenomenological reflection process. After the data had been transcribed and checked for accuracy, I read and reread each transcript from each phase of the study. This process is known as a naïve reading of the text, or the reading of the whole text to become familiar with the text and to allow initial thoughts and perceptions to emerge (Moustakas, 1994). This immersion within the data with reading and rereading assisted me in creating initial interpretations, which were also entered into field notes for analysis. This continued before and after each interview. This process indicated a cyclical interpretation of the meaning of the experience, which is consistent with the hermeneutic circle, or the process of understanding a text hermeneutically and for the purposes of interpretation.

Thematic analysis was used to reach the specific aims of my study—in other words, to understand the spiritual experiences of women in late life, and it is based upon the recommendations of Cohen, Kahn, and Steeves (2000). The text was representative of the experiences of the women in my study. The transcripts were read line-by-line and coded for specific phrases that indicated a salient aspect of the experience. The thematic analysis was based upon the following steps but in a non-linear fashion. Interview sections were grouped based upon key themes regarding the experience of spirituality as they emerged from the data. Then line-by-line coding was done and phrases were labeled with code names. These were small pieces of information that related their perceptions of how spirituality is experienced. Following open coding, like code names from each area of the phenomenon, in this case spirituality, were placed side by side together for further analysis, and then places into categories based on relation. Categories were then placed together for further analysis to discover the complex interrelations of the content drawn out from each element of the paradigm. Exemplars were chosen to represent the themes. Exemplar themes were

connected based on emergent themes and experiences the women expressed during interviews. From the processes of reading, analyzing, writing and reflecting, I arrived at the composite structure, or the essence, of the phenomenon under investigation. Moustakas (1994) explains, “each individual textural-structural description is used to develop a composite description of meaning and essence of the experience representing the whole group” (p. 121). This composite structure, or the essence, of the spirituality for the women in this study is presented as findings in the section below.

FINDINGS

The purpose of this phenomenological investigation was to explore and understand the lived experience of spirituality for women in advanced age and to develop a textural (what) and structural (how) account of their experiences as they pertain to spirituality. The research question was: How do women in advanced age experience their spirituality? Three essential themes emerged as a response to this central question. For the women in this study, the essence of their spirituality lies in: being profoundly grateful; engaging in complete acceptance; and having a strong sense of assuredness within a spiritual context. This work presented here offers a unique contribution to the literature. In addition to advancing our understanding of spirituality in the lives of the oldest-old, this research illuminates the intersections of spirituality, gratitude, acceptance, and assuredness. We as researchers recognize the importance of spirituality and religion to people in their later years, but have offered little to understanding the relationships old people have with God (in the broadest sense); however, positive psychology, while in its infancy, is attempting to make inroads regarding the nature and outcomes of this complex relationship (Krause, 2006). Research suggests that for individuals who believe in a God that is a source of control, a God who listens and knows, and a God who makes things ultimately good, are likely to parallel these beliefs in their relationships with others (Pollner, 1989). This assertion proves relevant for the women in this study and is directly tied to their expressions of gratitude, acceptance, and assuredness. Future work remains needed to examine the connections between gratitude, acceptance, and assuredness, and spirituality.

Spirituality as a Realm of Lived Experience

After 12 months of data collection and analysis of 30 interviews, three essential and distinctive themes emerged and were subsequently selected from the data to illustrate the essential aspects of how spirituality is experienced for the women in this study: being profoundly grateful; engaging in complete acceptance; and having a strong sense of assuredness (see Table 1). These domains represent how spirituality was experienced for the women, meaning all participants expressed the qualities listed below; however the depth of experience varies according to each woman. Although these essential components or themes of this experience can be differentiated, they cannot be completely separated from one another. These themes and their delineative sub-themes are interwoven and closely knit together to create the composite structure, or essence, or the invariant structure of how spirituality is experienced for the women in this study (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). In addition, spirituality and religion for these women are interchangeable terms used to describe major life events and parts of their personhood that are important to them. In other words, spirituality and religion are indistinguishable and conflated constructs. This is reflected throughout the findings.

Being Profoundly Grateful

The women in this study reported feeling a deep connection with the Transcendent or God. This relationship was of paramount importance to them and resulted in their abundance of gratitude. The participants express considerable gratitude, a thankful acknowledgment

between a giver and a receiver. For most of the women this expression of gratitude is grounded in their gratitude for God, but also the women in this study are grateful for most everything—the good and the bad they have witnessed in their lives, their family and friends, and their longevity and survival. This profound sense of gratitude is expressed in the following excerpts:

Thank you, Lord, for another day; yes I'm thanking you for another day. My days are numbered with all the ailments I have going on in my life and every day I wake up and that's another day. That's what happens with me on a day-to-day basis—I am thankful and I let Him know.

Another participant, Gloria, is grateful for her family and friends. She recognizes her spirituality in this gratitude. She explains:

It was my birthday last Saturday and we had a family get-together with my daughter's family. All I could was just sit there and watch and enjoy and be thankful. That's spirituality to me. I am also grateful for my friends, for their contact and even for you.

Rose is grateful for her father and the teachings he instilled in her as a young child. She credits those experiences as helping her be the woman she is now and appreciates her father's dedication and determination for making her attend church as a small child. In addition, she is thankful to be here another day:

I am very grateful for my father because he did treat us right; made us mind. He also made us go to church. I've had to rely on those beliefs a lot throughout years. I'm still relying on them today. I feel grateful for everything that happened back then and now. I am happy to be here today and I feel pretty blessed.

Taken further, these women are all extremely grateful for who and what they are, and for all that life has shown them. Some of the participants are grateful for God, while others are simply grateful for life. This expression of gratitude is essential to the experience of spirituality for the women in this study.

Engaging in Complete Acceptance

Closely linked to the ideas of a connection with the Transcendent and being grateful, the women describe how they practice acceptance—acceptance of life's complexity and mystery, as well as acceptance of themselves and others. In later life, the women embrace circumstances that are uncomfortable and unpleasant. They practice acceptance by resisting the need to change what they are unable to control. Cora discusses how she could have been more accepting earlier in life, reflecting on how personal tensions bothered her earlier in the lifecourse. While discussing past frustrations with her mother, she is reflexive about being accepting. Cora wishes she could have been more accepting earlier in life:

My relationship with my mother was always a little strained. As I got older I appreciated her raising us as a single mother, but when she came to live with us in old age I had a really hard time. She argued a great deal with my husband at the time. I allowed myself to be pulled into the mess instead of standing my ground. I think now I would be able to accept the situation, yes, be more accepting and tolerant. In my 90s I don't sweat the small stuff. I don't have time.

Acceptance is an important part of the lived experience of spirituality for the women in this study. They are accepting of life circumstances, as well as who they are as women in old age. They are able to recognize the difference between regret and reflection and articulate that now; in this phase of their life, they are able to practice radical acceptance. For example, Betty explains:

The older I got and the more I traveled and was exposed to the world and its many different religions, the more open and accepting I became to the way people are in the world and the way they believe. It's all about love and acceptance in the end.

Additionally, Gloria describes how she is more tolerant and open in later life, linking this acceptance to her spirituality:

At my age now I am much more tolerant and interested in the lives of others. You know, who I am here now. I thoroughly enjoy the wildlife outside this window. I never before paid any attention to ducks or the squirrels or anything. And I thoroughly enjoy it. And the bird—I never was that inquisitive. I'm really enjoying in nature. Now, what do you call that? It is a kind of spirituality, really. I'm learning all the time.

Additionally, the women discuss their aging, finitude, and ultimately mortality with calm and peace; there is an absence of death anxiety for the participants. These women do not necessarily welcome death, but are accepting of their mortality and finitude with clarity, realizing in their last chapter of life that their days are numbered and their physical existence is limited. These women transcend that anxiousness of everyday in a peaceful and contented manner. They have arrived at a place of complete acceptance. To what extent we can contribute this to age is questionable, but during interviews the women expressed contentment with life that is grounded not only in their spirituality, but also with the experiences of spirituality over time. In addition to engaging in complete acceptance, the women in this study accept with contentment their finitude and mortality. They actively contemplate their mortality and in doing so have come to the conclusion that they are not afraid to die. An essential component of this acceptance is a lack of death anxiety; for some of these women death is welcomed. Betty contemplates her death and concludes that she is ready when the time comes:

I'm much older than my dad when he died. Honestly, I would like to have my life end ... Daniel Schorr died last week peacefully at his home. And I thought what a beautiful thing to say for somebody and I was praying that could be my case. One of things that has concerned me a little is that I have an aneurism on my aorta and it's growing ... it could of course require surgery anytime, but what I do not want to happen is to be rushed to a hospital for emergency surgery. If it happens, I hope it goes ahead and kills me. I don't have a choice. So I have to take what comes. I trust in the process.

Having a Strong Sense of Assuredness

The women possess considerable strength and credit this to their belief in and relationship with God. As data collection continued and I began doing repeated interviews with participants, spending time with them and building relationships, I realized that all of the women in this study elucidated strength, particularly inner strength. Nygren, Norberg, and Lundman (2007) define inner strength as having the capacity to practice self-control and self-determination, while experiencing a sense of mastery, positive self-concept, and psychological wellbeing. This definition adequately describes my participants. The women exhibited inner strength in their self-determination and well-being; these attributes are essential to their spirituality. These findings support evidence of various qualitative studies conducted on women (Dingly, Roux, & Bush, 2000; Kotarba, Haile, Landrum, & Trimble, 2003). Specifically, the women demonstrated the inner strength over the life course and describe how their spirituality served as a promoter of their inner strength, helping them deal with challenges. Additionally, they described how they maintained their subjective well-being. The themes are explored below. Inner strength as a theme is captured in the experiences of Minnie as she talks about the origins and sources of her strength:

I get my strength from the Lord ... my belief and faith. Sometimes there is someone who thinks that if I say, "I've got the Lord," and they don't believe me. They think you're there by yourself, and I can do all things. But, yeah, I can do all things through Him and that strengthens me. There's got to be that backbone. I don't think you can do anything by yourself. For me, God is always with me.

One woman, Emma, comes to understand her strength during the course of our interview. At first, when asked, "describe for me where your strength comes from," she instantly tells me she doesn't think of herself as a strong person:

I don't know that I am strong. Sometimes I am physically weak and can't make it out of bed. That's not strong, but then again I've watched loved ones die and nursed them in their sickness. That takes strength.

Yet, as she continues to talk, she concludes that she does indeed have strength and credits that strength to her ability to connect with her community, her church community, and her spirituality through ritual. She explains:

I guess my strength comes from my serenity. I'm on my knees every Sunday morning. I feel a sense of serenity when I am there. The reminder that there is something greater than myself, something that I can be a part of that's greater and better than myself. This gives me strength.

The women rely on their spirituality as essential to their inner strength and are openly and insightfully aware of this. As spiritual women, they have immense inner strength and a strong spiritual center, and they are more accepting as they age and develop spiritually. Spirituality is important to the women in this study. Their conceptualization of spirituality emerged from their interviews and is interwoven throughout their narratives about life, indicating that spirituality maintains a considerable degree of saliency for these women over the lifecourse. Previous research and the research presented here indicate that spirituality remains important in old age and continues to develop over the life course. These findings show that spirituality is important to the women studied here. Spirituality is embedded in their everyday lives, provides them with strength, once was and remains an important part of their personhood, and continues to develop and intensify over the lifecourse.

DISCUSSION

In this study I explored spirituality as a lived experience for women in advanced age. I investigated this phenomenon through a textural (what) and structural (how) analysis of their narratives, which allowed me to arrive at a composite structure of their lived experience of spirituality, or what I interpret as the essence. This hermeneutic phenomenological analysis allowed me to arrive at an understanding of what is most essential about the spirituality for women in this study. During multiple interviews the women articulated a deep connection with the Transcendent or God. For the majority of occurrences that connection was expressed in relation to God. Their narratives reveal that for four of the six women, a relationship with God is paramount in their lives. For the other two, God did maintain a significant presence and served as an important aspect in how they understood their world. For everyone, the relationship with God provided them with strength, particularly in late life. In many ways this connection and relationship with God demonstrated by these women is supported by existing research (Krause, 2006; MacKinlay, 2006; Ramsey & Blieszner, 1999). For example, James (1902) suggested the importance of divine connection and relationship with God as the crux of religious life. Philosophers and theologians have been considering this connection considerably longer, but what these findings suggest is that this relationship is complex and may provide significant outcomes for dealing with the challenges associated with later life (Krause, 2006; Schieman, Bierman, & Ellison, 2010).

Gerontology, although recognizing the importance of spirituality and religion to people in their later years, has offered little to understanding the relationships old people have with God (in the broadest sense); however, positive psychology, while in its infancy, is attempting to make inroads regarding the nature and outcomes of this complex relationship (Krause, 2006). Research suggests that for individuals who believe in a God that is a source of control, a God who listens and knows, and a God who makes things ultimately good, are likely to parallel these beliefs in their relationships with others (Pollner, 1989). Research also suggests that for believers God represents a secure base, an ultimate friend, and a source of support, especially for older adults (Cicirelli, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 2005). Schieman et al. (2010) suggest this relationship with God or the Transcendent is likely to be more important than bonds with people for older adults. This assertion proves relevant for some of the women in this study; for others their relationship with God is of equal importance. God is a source of strength for the women. In addition to a connection with God, the women expressed a deep connection with the Transcendent in general, meaning a sense of something greater than themselves. These connections to the Transcendent intensify over the lifecourse and have positive effects for the women. These connections and the implications they have for other older adults are in need of further exploration.

Another essential component of spirituality is the profound gratitude the women both possess and express. Simply put: these women are grateful for everything—the good and joyous, the tragic and disheartening. This gratitude is expressed for God, people, and life. Similar to connections and relationships with God or the Transcendent, there is scant research exploring the role gratitude plays in the lives of older adults (Sandage, Hill, & Vaubel, 2011). Gratitude is commonly defined as a tendency to recognize and respond to the benevolence of others, and researchers suggest it can facilitate generativity and is also positively correlated with measures of mental health (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). Taken further, even less research exists on how having gratitude for God impacts individuals, particularly in later life (Sandage et al., 2011). Findings here suggest that the profound gratitude for their experiences with God and others is a variable in their ultimate sense of peace and happiness and is strongly connected with their spirituality.

Findings presented here suggest that acceptance is essential to the lived experience of spirituality for women in this study. Throughout multiple interviews, the participants explained how in old age they are more apt at engaging in complete acceptance, not only of themselves, but also of others and the realities (sometimes harsh) that have accompanied them on their life journeys. I was, and continue to be, most struck by their acceptance of their mortality and finitude. The women exhibit no death anxiety, meaning they are not afraid to die. For some of the women death is welcomed; others are content being grateful for each continued day of life, but remain fearless as they think about their demise. Acceptance is scantily researched within gerontology; what is available is linked tautologically with coping or is discussed in relation to physical signs of aging, appearance, and stereotypes.

Research suggests that spirituality is linked to the acceptance of self as aging and that belief frameworks that celebrate aging are helpful in allowing individuals to embrace themselves as aging (Manning, 2010). Findings here further contribute to this idea; the women in this study have belief frameworks that allow them to embrace who they are as old women. They look back on their lives and to the future with a sense of gratitude and complete acceptance. Findings also support existing knowledge regarding death anxiety in later life. The more commonly accepted view of death anxiety states that fear of death is a sign of lack of fulfillment or self-realization that leads to regret and despair (e.g., Erikson, 1963; Wong, Reker, & Gesser, 1994; Yalom, 1980). Findings presented here suggest these women have a sense of fulfillment and self-realization; I attribute this to their spirituality. This claim is

supported in existing literature. Wink (2006) found that spirituality and religiousness served as a buffer for fear of death. My participants narratives support compliment these findings.

Lastly, my participants also possess a strong sense of assuredness, meaning that they are comfortably dwelling in a place of confidence regarding their spirituality and who they are as spiritual women. Additionally, these women have extensive inner strength that they openly rely on when asked how they achieved extreme longevity. To suggest that they are merely surviving in late life is problematic; more accurately they are thriving. In terms of thriving, they exhibit a solid sense of inner strength and have a spiritual center that has deepened with age. These findings support and complement the existing knowledge concerning the experiences of the oldest-old. For example, Nygren et al. (2007) found that the very old have an inner strength that feeds from the philosophy that “life goes on.” This theme suggests that their inner strength is the reason for openness and acceptance in late life. Additionally, Stanford (2006) found that her female participants were resilient in late life and discovered that most of the thriving women had overcome major life challenges such as the untimely deaths of significant relatives, serious health challenges, and destructive marriages. My participants have paralleling occurrences, and their narratives suggest that their spirituality is a source of strength relied upon throughout these experiences.

This analysis examined narratives about how these women experienced their spirituality now and over the course of their lives. In addition, I investigated how these experiences of spirituality created opportunities for connection, served as sources of strength, and provided pathways for thriving in advanced old age—all of which were most salient for the participants. Essentially, I treated their spiritual experiences as an avenue for arriving at an understanding of how these women experienced spiritual development over the life course, and how their spiritual identity yields an assuredness and an integral part of their resilience. The experiences of these women add to our understanding and knowledge concerning the spiritual lives of people as they age and in late life. While some of my findings support existing research on spirituality and aging, they also offer a needed depth of understanding into the individual lived experiences of spirituality, particularly for women in the oldest-old segment of the population. My findings are consistent with various past research concerning spirituality and aging, but in addition suggest that a phenomenological approach or other qualitative methodologies are essential for discovering the intricacy regarding the interconnectedness of spirituality and aging (Blieszner & Ramsey, 2003).

Acknowledgments

This article is a result of my dissertation. I would like to thank Dr. Kathryn McGrew at Miami University, Oxford, OH for her guidance, mentorship, and willingness to read countless drafts.

REFERENCES

- Ardelt M, Ai AL, Eichenberger SE. In search for meaning: The differential role of religion for the middle-aged and older persons diagnosed with a life threatening illness. *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging*. 2008; 20(4):288–312.
- Atchley, R. Social forces and aging: An introduction to social gerontology. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth; 2000.
- Atchley R. Spirituality, meaning, and the experience of aging. *Generations*. 2008 Summer;32(2):12–16.
- Atchley, R. Spirituality and aging. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press; 2009.
- Blieszner, R.; Ramsey, L. Uncovering spiritual resiliency through feminist qualitative methods. In: McFadden, S.; Brennan, M.; Patrick, J., editors. *New Directions of Late Life Religiousness and Spirituality*. Binghamton, NY: Haworth Pastoral Press; 2003. p. 31-50.
- Bynum, CW. *Gender and religion: On the complexity of symbols*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press; 1986.

- Cicirelli V. God as the ultimate attachment figure for older adults. *Attachment & Human Development*. 2004; 6(4):371–388. [PubMed: 15764125]
- Cohen, M.; Kahn, D.; Steeves, R. Hermeneutic phenomenological research: A practical guide for nurse researchers. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; 2000. How to analyze the data; p. 71-83.
- Corbin J, Strauss A. Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology*. 1990; 13(1):3–21.
- Dingley C, Roux G. Inner strength in older Hispanic women with chronic illness. *Journal of Cultural Diversity*. 2003; 10(1):11–22. [PubMed: 12776543]
- Erikson, E. *Childhood and society*. New York: Norton; 1963.
- Foley L. Exploring the experience of spirituality in older women finding meaning in life. *Journal of Religious Gerontology*. 2000; 12(1):5–15.
- Glicksman GG, Glicksman A. Coming to terms: Is the literature on religion and aging useful for Jewish communal planning? *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging*. 2008; 20(3):194–205.
- Harvey I. Self-management of a chronic illness: An exploratory study on the role of spirituality among older African American women. *Journal of Women & Aging*. 2006; 18(3):75–88. [PubMed: 17000620]
- Idler EL, Kasl SV, Hays JC. Patterns of religious practice and belief in the last year of life. *Journals of Gerontology: Social Sciences*. 2001; 56B(6):S326–S34.
- James, W. *The varieties of religious experience: A study in human nature*. New York: Longmans, Green and Co; 1902.
- Johnson, M. Spirituality, finitude and theories of the lifespan. In: Bengtson, V.; Gans, D.; Putney, N.; Silverstein, M., editors. *Handbook of theories of aging*. 2nd ed. New York: Springer; 2009. p. 659-674.
- Kiesling C, Sorell GT, Montgomery MJ, Colwell R. Identity and spirituality: A psychosocial exploration of the sense of spiritual self. *Developmental Psychology*. 2006; 42(6):1269–1277. [PubMed: 17087559]
- Kirkpatrick LA. God as a substitute attachment figure: A longitudinal study of adult attachment style and religious change in college students. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. 1998; 24:961–973.
- Koenig H. Religion, spirituality and aging. *Aging & Mental Health*. 2006; 10(1):1–3. [PubMed: 16338807]
- Kotarba JA, Haile B, Landrum P, Trimble D. Inner strength and the existential self: Improving managed care for HIV+ women through the integration of nursing and sociological concepts. *Research in the Sociology of Health Care*. 2003; 21:87–106.
- Krause N. Gratitude toward God, stress, and health in late life. *Research on Aging*. 2006; 28(2):163–183.
- Krause N. Stressors arising in highly valued roles, meaning in life, and the physical health status of older adults. *Journals of Gerontology: Social Sciences*. 2004; 59B(5):S287–S297.
- Learn, CD. *Older women's experience of spirituality: Crafting the quilt*. New York: Garland; 1996.
- Lincoln, Y.; Guba, E. *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage; 1985.
- MacKinlay, E. *Spiritual care in the fourth age of life*. London, England: Anthecum Press; 2006.
- MacKinlay E, McFadden SH. Ways of studying religion, spirituality, and aging: The social scientific approach. *Journal of Religious Gerontology*. 2003; 16(3):75–90.
- MacKinlay E. The spiritual dimension of caring: Applying a model for spiritual tasks of ageing. *Journal of Religious Gerontology*. 2001; 12:151–166.
- Manning LK. An exploration of paganism: Aging women embracing the divine feminine. *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging*. 2010; 22(3):196–210.
- McCullough ME, Emmons RA, Tsang J. The grateful disposition: A conceptual and empirical topography. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 2002; 82:112–127. [PubMed: 11811629]
- McFadden, SH. Points of connection: Gerontology and the psychology of religion. In: Paloutzian, R.; Park, C., editors. *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality*. New York: Guilford; 2005. p. 162-176.

- McFadden, J. A pastor ponders the boomers. In: Kimble, MA.; McFadden, SH., editors. *Aging, spirituality and religion—A handbook*. Vol. 2. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press; 2003. p. 412-421.
- McFadden S, Kozberg C. Religious and spiritual supports for late-life meaning. *Generations*. 2008; 32(2):6–11.
- Moberg, D., editor. *Aging and spirituality: Spiritual dimensions of aging theory, research, practice, and Policy*. Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press; 2001.
- Moberg D. Research in spirituality, religion, and aging. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*. 2005; 45(1/2):11–40. [PubMed: 16172060]
- Moustakas, C. *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; 1994.
- Nelson-Becker, H. Practical philosophies: Interpretation of religion and spirituality by African American and European American elders. In: McFadden, S.; Brennan, M.; Patrick, J., editors. *New directions in the study of late life religiousness and spirituality*. Binghamton, NY: Hawthorne Pastoral Press; 2003. p. 85-100.
- Nygren B, Norberg A, Lundman B. Inner strength as disclosed in narratives of the oldest old. *Qualitative Health Research*. 2007; 17(8):1060–1073. [PubMed: 17928479]
- Nygren BB, Aléx LL, Jonsén EE, Gustafson YY, Norberg AA, Lundman BB. Resilience, sense of coherence, purpose in life and self-transcendence in relation to perceived physical and mental health among the oldest old. *Aging & Mental Health*. 2005; 9(4):354–362. [PubMed: 16019292]
- Pollner M. Divine relations, social supports, and well-being. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*. 1989; 30:92–104. [PubMed: 2470806]
- Ramsey, JL.; Blieszner, R. *Spiritual resiliency in older women: Models of strength for challenges through the life span*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; 1999.
- Ray R, McFadden S. The web and the quilt: Alternatives to the heroic journey toward spiritual development. *Journal of Adult Development*. 2001; 8(4):201–211.
- Sandage SJ, Hill PC, Vaubel DC. Generativity, relational spirituality, gratitude, and mental health: Relationships and pathways. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*. 2011; 21(1):1–16.
- Sandage SJ, Jankowski PJ, Link DC. Quest and spiritual development moderated by spiritual transformation. *Journal of Psychology & Theology*. 2010; 38(1):15–31.
- Schieman S, Bierman A, Ellison CG. Religious involvement, beliefs about God, the sense of mattering among older adults. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. 2010; 49(3):517–535. [PubMed: 20886699]
- Stanford B. Through wise eyes: Thriving elder women's perspectives on thriving in elder adulthood. *Educational Gerontology*. 2006; 32(10):881–905.
- Tornstam, Lars. *Gerotranscendence: A developmental theory of positive aging*. New York: Springer; 2005.
- Van Manen, M. *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press; 1990.
- Vahia IV, Depp CA, Palmer BW, Fellows I, Golshan S, Thompson W, et al. Correlates of spirituality in older women. *Aging & Mental Health*. 2011; 15(1):97–102. [PubMed: 20924814]
- Wink, P. Dwelling and seeking in late adulthood: The psychosocial implications of two types of religious orientation. In: McFadden, S.; Brennan, M.; Patrick, J., editors. *New directions in the study of late life religiousness and spirituality*. Binghamton, NY: Hawthorne Pastoral Press; 2003. p. 101-118.
- Wink P. Who is afraid of death? Religiousness, spirituality, and death anxiety in late adulthood. *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging*. 2006; 18(2/3):93–110.
- Wong, PTP.; Reker, GT.; Gesser, T. Death attitude profile-Revised: A multidimensional measure of attitudes toward death. In: Neimeyer, RA., editor. *Death anxiety handbook*. Washington, DC: Taylor & Francis; 1994. p. 121-148.
- Yalom, I. *Existential psychotherapy*. New York: Basic Books; 1980.
- Zinnbauer, BJ.; Pargament, KI. Religiousness and spirituality. In: Paloutzian, R.; Park, C., editors. *Handbook of psychology of religion, and spirituality*. New York: Guilford; 2005. p. 21-42.

Table 1

The “Essence” of How Spirituality is Experienced for Women in This Study (the composite structure of themes and sub-themes from the textual and structural analyses)

Being profoundly grateful	Engaging in complete acceptance	Having a strong sense of assuredness
Appreciation for opportunities to experience “life”—spiritual life; for God and their connection to God Express gratitude for what has been lived through	Accepting aging finitude, and mortality—no death anxiety Accepting past—hurts, injustices, and tragedies Accepting others	Possess inner strength Strong spiritual center—insight